

# 15

## Special Perspectives

JAMES BACKAS

As Special Consultant to the Chairman of National Endowment for the Arts from 1975 to 1977, James Backas had among his special responsibilities the development of a federal policy toward art at the community level. In 1977, Backas became the first Chief Executive Officer of the American Arts Alliance, Inc. (AAA), a national organization representing art museums, dance and opera companies, symphony orchestras, and theaters to the White House, Congress, and federal agencies. AAA was established by professional artists and arts institutions to develop unified positions on national issues, legislation, and policies as they affect the arts, and to convey such positions to the national arts community and to legislators and government officials in Washington.

Backas has also been Executive Director of the Maryland State Arts Council, and wrote background papers on the regional and state arts organization movements for the June 1980 National Partnership Meeting, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies in cooperation with the National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies. He has since written several other papers and articles related to arts policies. In 1982, Backas became Executive Director of the Southern Arts Federation.

His experience gives him a special perspective on the total scene. His main theme is that "Government funding is going to happen and will be ac-

cepted and expected at the local level.” Backas says that since there will be more government funding from several sources, more grant-making powers at the local level are needed; this will create more pressure for there to be local agencies that can carry out government purposes. He points out that while these can be private agencies, there must be a good working relationship with government if arts councils expect to function in this jurisdiction.

With that function will come accountability and the need for the arts council to concern itself functionally with the taxpayer, the arts consumers, and the arts producers. The local community will have to deal with the reasons to convince the governmental agencies that the local agency is serving a public purpose. This means that arts councils will become integrated with the totality of governmental concerns, and there may be clashes with the traditional thinking that “everyone” must be covered in the sense of entitlement monies and per capita distributions.

The “pioneer days are over.” There is all the more need for dreamers who can be passionate in their endeavors but who can accommodate the need to be homogeneous. Arts councils have to give up the freewheeling personal selection systems for a sense of responsibility for the public.

“We must be outraged by artistic mediocrity and social inequity – and [change] must be accomplished within the political system, which will give the arts dollars, prestige, stability, *and* responsibility,” Backas has said.

Reflecting on the contribution of arts councils to the total cultural renaissance, Backas reminds us that this contribution is not an accident. It has been bubbling up from under. Government agencies did not make it happen; they only nurtured it – the growth would have happened anyway. In his interview he points out that historically, after World War II, many GIs – thousands of young people – were changed culturally.

The traditional indifference to art in America was given a good challenge when the American GI saw that the arts were important in other countries to people like himself. There was local pride in museums and opera companies; this was part of their identity. On top of this, the GI Bill allowed him to go to college for two to four years, and there he was exposed to cultural events through such [activities] as the college concert series. He was exposed to art, theater, and music as part of his student ticket. Thus, the availability of junior colleges and higher education in general, coupled with more leisure time and prosperity, made the circumstances right for his turning to the arts.

The National Endowment for the Arts and state arts agencies were created in response to this need. They did not create the need, but they were able to make things happen because of the need. Local councils make

things happen; state arts agencies and the Endowment are reactive organizations, "but things cannot happen without the voice of the people."

Arts council directors must be able to identify valid artistic purposes and combine them with valid public purposes — the job is to know the "law for thing and to see that it does not run wild and abuse the arts and the artist." The ingredients for a successful council are good administration, imagination, ability to get things done, and a special sensitivity to art.

## NANCY HANKS

Nancy Hanks, whose current role is as a trustee of many corporate and foundation boards, served as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Council on the Arts from 1969 to 1977. She came to that role with a full recognition and knowledge of the community arts council movement. As Executive Secretary of the Special Studies Project, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and as Project Coordinator of the Rockefeller Panel report in 1965, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, she included in that study mention of the potential of community councils:

In an increasing number of cities, arts councils are playing an important role in coordinating various individual arts organizations and practices. Some of these are private bodies, a few are public. [Many] are so new that no formula for that organization can be laid down. But it is clear that a community arts council should keep in close touch with the local government. It may be possible that an arts council could, in some instances, be organized as a municipal arts commission. It is in serving as a bridge between the local government and as an arts commission — whether through formal statutory arrangement or informally — that a cultural officer can play a particularly constructive role in the development of the arts.<sup>1</sup>

If arts councils in cities and states can focus attention on common problems and bring the representatives of various art forms together to help solve them, then it is possible to hope that these efforts can be expanded to embrace regional and national cooperative efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Hanks came to the Endowment, then, with a greater background in this area than either her predecessor or her successor. During the eight-year period of her leadership, most of the active community programs were launched.

Before she took on the Endowment role, she was a board member and then president of ACA. In reflecting upon her involvement there, she felt

she was asked onto that board because she believed in community arts agencies and the importance of diversity.

Commenting on that belief, Hanks has discussed the fact that community arts councils must emphasize that diversity and keep the grassroots involvement. She feels that the primary goal of community councils today must be to create local dollars. The roles have changed because communities have changed. "In 1965, the main focus was keeping the orchestra going and alive. Today we want to keep the orchestra alive for many reasons." That is because the perception of the arts in the community is different today, and there is a much broader definition of the arts through such circumstances as the use of public spaces and downtown plazas, the expansion of leisure time, and the return to pride in the community. "You cannot celebrate your community without the arts," she has said.

The arts councils must know their arts and know their community, and must "help create the environment for community discussion and action about the inclusion of artists and minorities, about the dollars involved. The relationships between the arts and the community will be different for every community. The arts councils must provide public education to help people understand the continuity of the arts—the plurality, variety, and alternatives."

"The arts are key; arts councils are not key." Arts councils must move with the times and be flexible; there will never be a day or time when they do not fight politicization every day and do not have to talk about the importance of the arts in the community.

She tried to be a good listener and to really absorb and to respond to what she saw and heard as she traveled to various communities as Endowment Chairman. Two programs initiated under Nancy Hanks seemed to relate to bringing special attention to total communities: the City Spirit program, and the Architecture and Environmental Arts program. "Where there was a City Spirit program, communities seemed to have some tools for working together. The City Spirit involvement really planted the seeds which have remained in constant motion, but the idea of the total community working together seems to have taken hold in many cases." City Spirit, she reminds us, was a National Council idea (Lawrence Halprin was a big advocate), which gave it a certain verve.

The philosophy of the second program, Architecture and Environmental Arts, bolstered by the support of such people as Charles Eames, caused "cities to look at their alternative futures." These Endowment programs—City Edges, City Options, Livable Cities—made mayors pay attention to the arts, architecture, and environment. This and similar activities caused groups such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors to take their resolution seriously.

It has been substantiated that the communities involved in these pro-

grams would agree on the importance of these incentives for the work they accomplished with the small amounts of money available.

In discussing leadership, Hanks has made a simple statement. It must come from the community; those who are the best “are the ones who capture other people’s dreams.”

## NOTES

1. Rockefeller Panel, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 122-23.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 49.